

# A birthday celebration for John S. Fordtran, MD

C. Richard Boland, MD, Guenter Krejs, MD, Michael Emmett, MD, and Charles Richardson, MD

On November 15, 2011, a celebration was held for John S. Fordtran, MD (Figure 1), on the occasion of his 80th birthday. The event was initially suggested by Dr. Fordtran's long-time colleague, Guenter Krejs, MD, who traveled to Dallas from Austria for the event. He was assisted by Charles Richardson, MD, and C. Richard Boland, MD.

The celebration began on the evening of November 14, with a dinner party held at the elegant Aldredge House on Swiss Avenue in Dallas for the out-of-town guests and some of John's colleagues from his early academic career in Dallas. John's career was recounted by a gathering of out-of-town guests and by his academic colleagues from the University of Texas Southwestern Medical School at Dallas (UTSW) (Figures 2–4). Among those present who provided reminiscences was Marvin H. Sleisenger, MD, Dr. Fordtran's collaborator with the classic textbook *Gastrointestinal Disease*. Dr. Sleisenger traveled from San Francisco and was still spry and engaging at the age of 88. Other guests in attendance who spoke about John's impact on their profession were his prior gastroenterology fellow, Michael Brown, MD, who won the Nobel Prize in

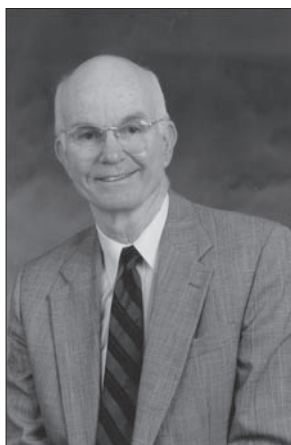


Figure 1. John S. Fordtran, MD.



Figure 3. University of Texas Southwestern colleagues, Drs. Dan Foster, Norman Kaplan, and Don Seldin, with John Fordtran at the reception.



Figure 2. John Fordtran telling a story at the reception.



Figure 4. John Fordtran being presented with a birthday cake.

**Corresponding author:** C. Richard Boland, MD, GI Cancer Research Laboratory, Division of Gastroenterology, Department of Internal Medicine, 250 Hoblitzelle, Baylor University Medical Center at Dallas, 3500 Gaston Avenue, Dallas, Texas 75246 (e-mail: rickbo@baylorhealth.edu).

Medicine or Physiology in 1985; Mike Emmett, MD, chairman of the Department of Internal Medicine at Baylor University Medical Center (BUMC); and Mr. Joel Allison, president and CEO of the Baylor Health Care System. Other friends in attendance were Donald Seldin, MD, past chairman of the Department of Internal Medicine at UTSW who initially recruited Dr. Fordtran to the faculty, who regaled the group with some of the history and accomplishments that punctuated John's career; John's good friend, Dan Foster, MD, who succeeded Dr. Seldin as chairman of internal medicine at UTSW; his long-time colleague and chief of the Division of Gastroenterology at BUMC, Dan Polter, MD; John McWhorter, president of BUMC; Boone Powell Jr., past president of BUMC during Dr. Fordtran's tenure as department chairman; and John Dietschy, MD, who succeeded John as chief of gastroenterology at UTSW. Other out-of-town guests present included Drs. Raj Goyal (Boston), Edward Lee (Washington, DC), Pete Peterson (Breckenridge, Colorado), and from Austria, Drs. Flori Fuerst, Christine Kapral, and Heimo Wenzl, just to mention a few.

On the morning of November 15, Dr. Fordtran presented at medical grand rounds in the Beasley Auditorium at BUMC. He reviewed the evolution of the discovery of Whipple's disease and our current understanding of this disease. His introduction was provided by Drs. Emmett and Boland and included a review of his curriculum vitae.

It was recounted that Dr. Fordtran is a native of Stockdale, Texas, near San Antonio, and was born in 1931. He attended the University of Texas at Austin from 1949 to 1952 and then Tulane Medical School from 1952 to 1956. He then came to Dallas and was an intern and resident in internal medicine at Parkland Memorial Hospital from 1956 to 1958. He had a brief stint as a researcher at the National Institutes of Health (NIH) in Bethesda, MD, from 1958 to 1959; he reports that the experience was not ideal because he missed the involvement in clinical medicine, although he was stimulated by the academic atmosphere and spirit of inquiry that permeated the institution. He then moved to the Indian Health Service, where he served as chief of medicine on the Navajo Reservation at Fort Defiance Hospital in Arizona for 16 months, during 1959 to 1960.

His next step was to become a research fellow under the tutelage of Franz Ingelfinger, MD, in Boston from 1960 to 1962. There he began what would become a storied career as a world-renowned gastrointestinal physiologist. He developed the use of a nonabsorbable marker of gastrointestinal fluid volume, which permitted him to measure a variety of key, previously unexplored issues in the physiology of absorption and secretion by the gut. His experience with Dr. Ingelfinger made John an official "Fingerling." John pointed out that his training was largely directed by Don Seldin, who had big plans for John back in Dallas.

In 1962, John returned to Dallas as an instructor in internal medicine at UTSW and Parkland Memorial Hospital, under the careful guidance of Dr. Seldin. He quickly rose through the academic ranks, being named chief of gastroenterology in 1963 (Figures 5 and 6) and full professor of medicine in 1969,



**Figure 5.** The Division of Gastroenterology of the University of Texas Southwestern Medical School at Dallas in 1970. Front row: Ed Eigenbrodt, Burt Combes, John Fordtran, John Dietschy, Steve Schenker. Second row: Charles Richardson, Fred Bieberdorf, Charles Biltz, David Saltzman, Charles Walker, Richard Stone. Third row: Dan Polter, David Nall, Gregory Whelan, Fred Wilson, Verney Sallee.



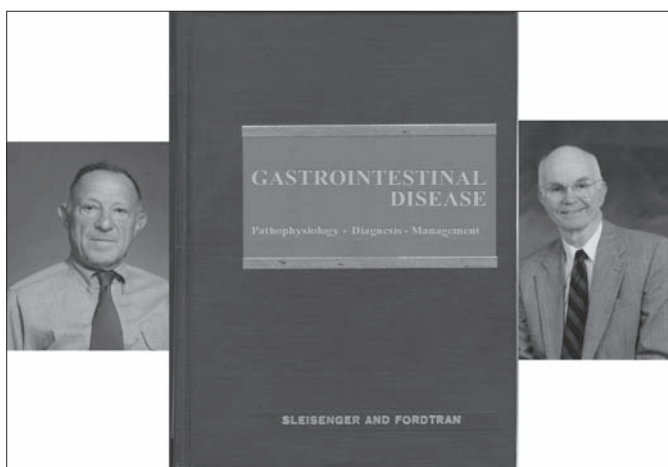
**Figure 6.** The Division of Gastroenterology of the University of Texas Southwestern Medical School at Dallas in 1976. Front row: Charles Walker, Dan Polter, Athol Ware, Burton Combes, John Fordtran, John Dietschy, Pete Loeb, Pete Peterson. Second row: Stephen Sittler, John Andersen, James Barnhart, Francis Bride, Jim Sones, Ranier Zahlten, Charles Richardson, Chuck Brady, Raj Goyal, Massimo Carrella, Guenter Krejs, Stuart Frank. Third row: Tom Rogoff, John Jackson, Unknown, Allen Rubin, Ray Verm, Abram (Chick) Eisenstein, David Langdon, Mike Allen, Unknown, Ray Burk, Ron Barkley.

an astonishing 7 years after his return to Dallas. He served as associate editor of the *Journal of Clinical Investigation* from 1972 to 1977, was elected to the American Society for Clinical Investigation (aka the "Young Turks") in 1968 and became its president in 1976, and was also elected to the Association of American Physicians (aka the "Old Turks") in 1972. He served as the editor in chief of *Gastroenterology* from 1977 to 1981. He had grants from the NIH throughout his active research career and won a prestigious MERIT Award from the NIH in 1991. He published over 182 original articles from 1961 to 2010, which included 20 papers in the *New England Journal of Medicine*, 38 in the *Journal of Clinical Investigation*, and 65 in *Gastroenterology*, representing monumental accomplishments.





**Figure 7.** John Fordtran's gastroenterology physiology laboratory at Baylor University Medical Center at Dallas, circa 1988. Front row: Kenneth Fine, Diana Santa Ana, Janie Francis, Heinz Hammer. Middle row: Lydia Rivera, Larry Schiller, Sharon Michael, Carol Santa Ana. Third row: John Fordtran, Jack Porter, Mudassir Sheikh.



**Figure 8.** The iconic *Sleisenger and Fordtran Gastrointestinal Disease*, first edition, 1973.

During his career, John served as chairman of the Department of Internal Medicine at BUMC from 1979 to 1996 and president of Baylor Research Institute from 1991 to 2000 (Figure 7). He received numerous awards from the American Gastroenterological Association (AGA). He was awarded the Distinguished Achievement Award for his research in 1971, the Fiterman Award for Clinical Research in 1990, the Distinguished Educator Award in 1991, the Julius Friedenwald Award for contributions to the field of gastroenterology (the AGA's highest honor) in 1993, and the Janssen Award for Lifetime Achievement in Gastroenterology in 1999, making him almost certainly the most recognized and celebrated figure by the AGA. John has had international impact as well. He won the King Faisal International Prize in Medicine in 1984 and was elected fellow of the Royal College of Physicians in London in 1997. In addition, he won the Ralph Tompsett Award for Excellence in Medical Education at BUMC in 2007, arguably anointing him as the consummate clinician, researcher, and teacher in his field. Most would have been proud to have excelled in just one of these endeavors; John excelled in all he did.



**Figure 9.** John Fordtran and Marvin Sleisenger, at work on their textbook in Los Cabos.



**Figure 10.** Attendees at the gastroenterology case conference.

Not to diminish the above-cited accomplishments, but most clinicians in the field of gastroenterology know him best for editorship of Sleisenger and Fordtran's *Gastrointestinal Disease*, which had its inaugural edition in 1973 and is currently in its 9th edition (Figures 8 and 9). Most clinicians consider it the gold standard of gastroenterology textbooks.

The medical grand rounds presentation was attended by a large audience of colleagues, former students, residents, fellows, and friends. After his lecture, the group moved to the Davis Auditorium in the Roberts Tower for a series of case presentations and discussions that were a recreation of the clinical case conference that was developed by John at UTSW (Figure 10). Several colleagues made presentations of unusually challenging cases, which both instructed and regaled the audience.

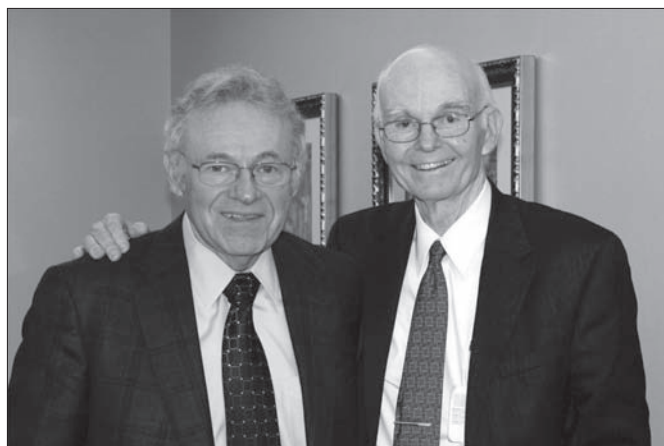
The first to present was Edward Lee, MD, chief of pathology at Howard University College of Medicine in Washington, DC, who discussed a mysterious case of a giant ulcerated inflammatory mass in the cecum that occurred in the setting of Bechet's syndrome. Guenter Krejs, MD, and Heimo Wenzl, MD, from Graz, Austria, presented a case of severe D-lactic acidosis in a patient with short bowel syndrome following complications of bariatric surgery, which was exacerbated by the ingestion of simple sugars. Glenn Davis, MD, from Little Rock, Arkansas, showed some previously censored slides of Dr. Fordtran examining a patient from the 1970s and then presented a vexing case of mesenteric fibrosis syndrome, challenging the group to suggest



**Figure 11.** Drs. Krejs, Fordtran, Richardson, Sleisenger, and Boland at the birthday luncheon.

an ideal management plan. Mark Feldman, MD, chairman of medicine at Presbyterian Hospital, Dallas, presented a case of acute appendicitis that complicated chronic ulcerative colitis, an illness that required a nimble diagnosis to reach an optimal outcome. Jane-Claire Williams, MD, and C. Richard Boland, MD, from BUMC presented the case of a young woman with juvenile polyposis and chronic anemia, in which the genetic alteration causing the juvenile polyposis was also responsible for the diagnosis of hereditary hemorrhagic telangiectasia (also known as Rendu-Osler-Weber syndrome), which accounted for abnormalities on her x-rays and her family history of severe arteriovenous malformations. Finally, Reed Hogan Jr., MD, from Jackson, Mississippi, presented a complicated case of liquid caustic ingestion that led to multiple strictures. He acknowledged that he had presented this same case at the gastroenterology conference in Dallas 28 years earlier and marveled at how innovative endoscopic technologies at Baylor relieved the symptoms and avoided risky surgical treatments at that time. All agreed that the conference was an excellent recreation of the lively clinical atmosphere associated with the conferences initiated by Dr. Fordtran in the 1970s.

The final piece of the celebration was a lunch in John's honor, followed by a series of testimonials by his friends, professional colleagues, and former students, led by Dr. Krejs (*Figures 11–13*). An incomplete list of those who spoke were Drs. John Andersen, Rick Boland, George Bo-Linn, Roger Camp, Dan DeMarco, Mike Emmett, Mark Feldman, Raj Goyal, Kent Hamilton, Greg Hodges, Reed Hogan (Jr. and



**Figure 12.** John Fordtran, past chairman, and Mike Emmett, current chairman of internal medicine at Baylor University Medical Center at Dallas.



**Figure 13.** John Fordtran telling a story at the birthday luncheon in his honor.

III), Ed Lee, Dan Norman, Elizabeth Odstrcil, Pete Peterson, Dan Polter, Charlie Richardson, Don Seldin, Larry Schiller, Marv Sleisenger, and Stu Spechler. John commented that among the most important aspects of the gathering was seeing some of his oldest friends—notably Drs. Seldin and Sleisenger—at his side together with all of his prior colleagues and trainees, noting the remarkable number of clinicians who had taken the lessons learned over the years to patients in Dallas and throughout Texas, the United States, and the world.

Finally, Dr. Fordtran closed in his characteristically humble fashion and thanked all those who had traveled from near and far to see him. He asked the group to reassemble in 10 years, on the occasion of his 90th birthday.